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Following Giacometti: Copying as a Basis for Studio-Based Research

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To copy or not to copy; is that the question?

The debate over copying in the art classroom is a longstanding and contentious one. In the past, the discussion has been erroneously characterized as a two-sided argument between those who view copying as the vilest of crimes to be perpetrated in an art classroom and those who see in it a useful and even essential tool for learning.

According to Duncum (1988), however, the debate's complexity stems from the fact that it involves two different *approaches* to copying; copying as expression versus copying as a form of learning. Those who equate all image-making with art and art as self expression, such as Orban and Viola (1958, 1936), necessarily find themselves siding with Lowenfeld's research and his oft-cited injunction "Never let a child copy anything!" (Lowenfeld, 1952, p.4).

There is, however, a host of studies that refute the dichotomy between expression and learning (Hubbard, 1991; Leeds, 1984; Pariser, 1979; Kozlowki and Yakel, 1980). Leeds (1984),

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for example, claims that self expression is formed through a process of learning of which copying is an integral part.

Lamme and Thompson (1994) make the argument that in other areas of activity such as reading, music, and sports, students are actually *encouraged* to have models which to emulate. Along with Holt (1983), they make the case that children use adults and peers as models from which to learn not only of the product, but also the process of art-making.

Similarly, Kozlowski and Yakel (1980) state that “by copying exemplary models the child will add to the repertoire of techniques and as a result open for himself a new dimension of expression. Thus, copying is a direct line to creativity” (p.26).

An overview of the relevant literature reveals that the debate is primarily centered on students at the elementary or junior high-school levels (Duncum, 1988, p. 204).

Past a certain age - or so the argument goes - copying becomes at best a technical exercise, and at worst a quaint throwback to old-fashioned forms of art education that many contend have been rightly relegated to the waste basket of history ever since the Impressionists decided to break with tradition and turn their backs on what they considered a conservative and stifling form of learning.

However, if such a major body of research exists demonstrating the benefits of copying for children, surely older students can also profit from the same. After all, a brief survey of art history reveals how widespread an activity copying has been amongst those whom we consider accomplished artists; not only those for whom copying was an established exercise within the educational context of their time, as was the case, for example, of Rembrandt or Delacroix, but more tellingly amongst recent artists such as Francis Bacon, Lucian Freud, Euan Uglow and Tony Scherman, to name but a few.

Art-Based Research

In the last decade, a new emphasis has been placed in academic circles, and especially within art education, on the potential for studio practice as a site for the creation of knowledge.

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Terms such as *art-based* or *studio-based* research are all part of a new paradigm based on the theory that new knowledge can be gained through the process of creating artwork.

Bolt (2007) describes this paradigm as “a form of tacit knowledge (which) provides a very specific way of understanding the world, one that is grounded in material practice” (p.29).

Praxical knowledge takes a number of forms and it is this multiplicity that provides creative arts research with its distinctive character. Whilst the artwork is imminently articulate and eloquent in its own right, knowing and the generative potential of process have the potential to reveal new insights; both those insights that inform and find a form in artworks and those that can be articulated in words. (p.31)

David Hockney's (2006) book *Secret Knowledge: Rediscovering the Lost Techniques of the Old Masters* serves as an excellent example of such research. Hockney, in collaboration with optical scientist Charles Falco, makes the claim that, contrary to established art historical beliefs, the use of pin hole cameras in painting did not stem from the nineteenth century, but may well have gone as far back as four centuries prior.

Although the “Hockney-Falco Thesis”, as it has come to be called, is still a subject of intense conjecture¹, what is important for the purpose of this paper is the way in which Hockney reached his initial conclusions. His methodology, while consisting of a great deal of practical historical research, was based on the process of creating artwork.

Essentially, Hockney argues that only “an artist, a mark-maker, who is not as far from practice, or from science as an art historian” (p.13), could have made these discoveries; the tacit knowledge that comes from making art brings insight that cannot be gained in any other way.

Similarly, the research presented in this paper stems from work done in an artist's studio; without the act of artistic creation, the insights and knowledge described here would not have been possible.





Following Giacometti

So, what can, in practical terms, be learnt from copying? What is it that actually occurs when an artist chooses to focus on copying as a methodology in the studio?

This research is part of a larger ongoing project that stems from my personal interest in the Swiss sculptor and painter Alberto Giacometti (1901-1966). Some time ago, my curiosity concerning Giacometti's working methods led me to several initial creative experiments which in turn have led me to thinking about questions concerning how artistic research in general and research into artists in particular is approached.

Focussing principally on Giacometti's paintings, my intention is to explore the practical question of how Giacometti worked in his studio through a physical recreation using practical working methods rather than from a purely conceptual basis.

The choice of subjects for my paintings is limited to those that make up the vast majority of Giacometti's own work, namely still lifes, standing nudes and human faces, the last two being depicted from a frontal perspective.

Rather than trying to create a replica of a particular Giacometti painting, it is his artistic methodology that I am replicating by a process of exploration informed by written and recorded sources, photographic reproductions, my own observation of his work *in situ*, and a great deal of experimentation and intuition.

The resulting works represent my attempts at reconstructing how Giacometti's paintings were "built"; not only examining the way that he applied paint to canvas but also the role of factors such as erasure, layering and reworking - factors upon which I will elaborate in the following sections of this article.

Second-hand accounts can only answer the basic question of how he worked; only through recreation can one come to understand why he worked in that way, or rather what were the end-results of those practical decisions on the aesthetic





characteristics of the finished paintings. In essence, however, my methodology stems from an apparently simple act - that of copying.

Creating Knowledge in the Artist's Studio

During the course of my research, I have made a number of discoveries. Some of these serve as practical proof of information that I had already come across in the various monographs, catalogues and other assorted publications on Giacometti that I have studied over the years. Others are, to my knowledge, completely new, or serve to add a new dimension to previous knowledge.

What follows is an examination of three different paintings of my own creation, each of which represents a different avenue of learning that resulted from my investigations. Although they are in chronological order, they are but three paintings amongst several dozen, and so illustrate various stages of my research.



Figure 1.

Sebastien Fitch. *St Bees Studio with Apple*, 18x26 inches, oil on canvas.

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My experience working on this still life (fig. 1), inspired by Giacometti's *Apple on a Sideboard* (1937), and the resulting observations, are what planted the seeds for this research project. At the time, I was simply trying to find a way of loosening up my painting style, which I felt had become too controlled and mechanical; Giacometti, with his apparently free, impressionistic handling of paint seemed like a logical artist to look at. Little did I know that, with this first piece, I was embarking on a course of research that would take over my life as an artist for the next several years.

I proceeded to set up a still life consisting of an apple sitting on a stool in the middle of my studio. I first quickly sketched in the stool and its surroundings. My goal was to focus as much as possible on the apple and not get bogged down by the details of the surrounding room, which, by the nature of how I lived and worked, was a busy, chaotic environment. As I painted, I found that my gaze and my brush inevitably slipped to one area or another of the studio and it was a constant struggle to keep my attention concentrated on the apple itself.

After many hours of work, I called upon a colleague² to get an initial reaction to this new direction in my painting. Half way through our discussion, head cocked quizzically to one side, he suddenly said:

"You know, it looks like the apple is almost at the center of the canvas."

I stared at the painting for a moment.

"Actually", he added, "I think it's *right* in the middle."

I grabbed a ruler, and upon examination it turned out that the apple was indeed just short of a millimeter to the right of the exact center of the canvas. This had not been my intention. When I had started, the stool had been quickly sketched in; the placement of the apple, however, had clearly shifted as the work had progressed.



The ensuing discussion quickly led us to an inevitable conclusion. Put simply, one of Giacometti's goals was to literally *paint what he saw*. From the point of view of scale, this meant that an apple on a canvas would never be the same size as an actual apple for the simple reason that it would always be at a certain distance from the painter. For this reason, I had chosen to work accordingly and paint the view of the studio at the scale that I observed it. I focused on the apple and reworked it repeatedly, trying to paint it at the exact size that I viewed it.

In the process, however, I had ended up unwittingly demonstrating another phenomenon of visual perception; if one is



Figure 2.

Sebastien Fitch. *Standing Nude*, 26x10 inches, oil on canvas.

From left to right: At hour 1, hour 6, and hour 18 (final state).

focusing one's gaze on a subject, that subject will be exactly at the center of one's field of vision and therefore, if one is being true to one's perception, that subject will be at the exact center of the canvas. This effect had been completely unconscious; I had simply set out to paint what I saw.

Throughout his life, Giacometti eloquently expressed the impossibility of his goal as an artist; to express what it is to be human - to communicate one's subjective visual experience to others, and to do so through the medium of paint and sculpture (Genet, 1958; Bonnefoy, 2001). His principal subjects were portraits, nudes and still lifes, and his models were, for the most part, people and places that made up his everyday life; his wife, his brother, his mistress, his studio and the view from his window. "The most difficult thing to do well", he claimed "is what's most familiar" (Lord, 1965, p.67).

The impossibility of his endeavor led him to rework his paintings over and over again, never satisfied; he could work on the same piece for weeks or months on end. Observers would often bemoan the fact that he would continue working on a painting that they considered successful, only to apparently eradicate that success (Lord, 1965, p.90).

I therefore decided to mimic this obsessive method. I began to paint a figure (figure 2) with the conscious decision that I was not going to seek an endpoint to the work. Using information from James Lord's (1965) account of sitting for Giacometti³, I chose only four paints; black, white, ochre and a tiny amount of burnt sienna. I would allow myself one hour or so every morning to work on the painting, but give myself no timeframe, no limit as to how many days I would continue. At that stage in my work, I found that this forced regimen of one hour per morning was necessary in order for me to replicate, however inadequately, Giacometti's obsessive nature. As I continued my research, however, I would eventually find that such an artificial contrivance was to become unnecessary - this matter will be discussed further in the context of the third and final painting being presented in this paper.



When I first tried to replicate what I considered at the time to be Giacometti's singular style, the results were less than satisfactory. In particular, I seemed incapable of matching the various tones of greys and browns that were a constant element to his work.

What I would learn from the eighteen painting sessions that resulted in this piece was that the colours in Giacometti's work were not actually pre-mixed in any way, but rather resulted from his constant reworking on the canvas. The various layers of paint would mix into each other and result in a multitude of subtle tones that were, for lack of a more poetic description, the result of chance.

Eventually, I was to discover that the same could be said of other aesthetic aspects of Giacometti's work. The colours and the texture of his paintings, as well as the centrality of the subject within his canvas, were not a matter of "style" at all, but rather a by-product of his process.

In essence, this process of constant reworking expresses the impossibility of his goal, thus succeeding in spite of itself in communicating the ultimately futile nature of his endeavor. Literally, the medium *embodies* the message.

I could have understood none of this if I hadn't gone through a similar process through a mimetic method that helped me get closer to Giacometti's own frame of mind. Reading about it in a monograph simply could not take the place of experiencing it.

Having gained insight, however partially, into Giacometti's basic methodology, I moved on to another of his favourite pictorial subjects: the human face. Knowing that he had worked both from life as well as from memory, I chose to do the latter, looking simply to understand how his particular mark making affected how he represented human features. I was not looking to represent any person in particular, but simply to paint a human face as closely as my memory would allow.





Figure 3.

Sebastien Fitch. *Imaginary Portrait II*, 16x20 inches, oil on canvas.
 Left and middle: in progress.
 At right: final state.

The resulting experience (figure 3) proved to be singularly fascinating, as well as frustrating beyond anything I had experienced as an artist. As I painted, the very nature of the face before me changed as it emerged and disappeared from the grey miasma of gradual over-painting.

At times, it was a mask: static, fixed, false and lifeless. At other times it seemed to be merely a jumble of disparate features: a mouth, a nose, one eye on the left, another on the right, each separate as if belonging to different people, like a haphazard jigsaw.

Occasionally the features would coalesce, and I would begin to feel as if I could almost recognize the face before me; as if my memory were taking over the movements of my brush and reconstructing the image of a friend or lover that had been subconsciously etched into my mind. At such times I thought I could almost guess who it was I was reminded of, but then this impression would dissolve just as suddenly as it had materialized.

Odder still, were the moments - very few moments - when I

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felt not only as if I were painting the face of an actual person, but also as if there was someone looking back at me from the surface of the canvas. With only a brushstroke, however, the whole structure would come crashing down, all likeness cease, all presence evaporate, with only a mass of grey paint left behind.

The series of works of which this painting is an example - these *Imaginary Portraits*, as I have come to call them - are the closest I have come to an intimate, empathetic understanding of Alberto Giacometti as an artist and fellow human being; as an Other, to use existentialist terminology.

By trying to emulate his obsessive reworking in a mechanical, almost synthetic fashion - giving myself a forced routine of one hour's work on the same canvas a day, for example - I stumbled upon phenomenological observations which led me to become genuinely obsessed. Whilst working on these paintings over the space of months, countless hours were spent working and reworking, not knowing when and if to stop, always hoping that the next few minutes worth of painting would bring me closer to success or seemingly right back to where I'd started.

Similarly, Lord's account of sitting for Giacometti relates how the work seemed never to end; it was either a terrible mess, or just beginning to succeed. Even on the occasions where the artist seemed pleased, the frustration would ebb away only briefly; "il y a une ouverture" ("there is an opening"), he is quoted as constantly saying, which meant that there was a ray of hope after all and the work was worth continuing.

So once more we were confronted by the utter impossibility of what Giacometti is attempting to do. A semblance, an illusion is, in any case, obviously all that can be attained, and he knew it. But an illusion is not enough. This inadequacy becomes literally day by day, I think, less tolerable (..)even as he strives to go on, to go further. There is always, perhaps, a possibility of going a little further, not very far but a little further, and in the realm of the absolute a little is limitless. (Lord, 1965, p.91)



Essentially, Giacometti saw no hope of success, no hope of reaching his goal, so there was an absolute freedom to continue. By trying to understand his work through the act of copying, I ended up partaking in an experiential act that went beyond physical questions of technique and into a mental realm of extreme empathy, which resulted in shared obsession.

His obsession was to depict on canvas his subjective visual experience; my interest lay in understanding how he had accomplished these depictions. However, the more I worked at comprehending the physical properties of his working method, the more I shared in his own frustration, until eventually I was no longer thinking of the process, but was partaking in, engulfed by, the substance. I found myself similarly obsessed; drawn into a mania of constant reworking and repetition, trying to reach a goal that seemed forever just a moment's effort away.

If someone else tried to do what I'm doing, he'd have the same difficulties I'm having.(..)And yet it seems so simple. What I'm trying to do is just to reproduce on canvas (..)what I see. (Giacometti, as quoted in Lord, 1965, p.89)

Summary and Conclusions: Learning through Mimesis

This research demonstrates that the apparently simple act of copying can serve as a basis for an original, multi-faceted approach to studio-based learning. To review my main points, I ask two questions: what was learned using this methodology, and what was needed in order to reach these conclusions?

Firstly, each of the three paintings described above represents different acquired knowledge. The first piece reveals phenomenological knowledge; it serves as a practical demonstration of optical phenomena leading to a better understanding of human visual perception and its representation in art. Such phenomena may well be documented in written form, but it is quite another thing to discover and understand them through practical experience.

The second piece serves both the practicing artist as well as the art-historian. The knowledge that Giacometti's visual style

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was not an end in itself, but rather a product of his process - a byproduct of his obsessive working method - adds both to a greater understanding of the complex interrelation between process and product, as well as to the nature of Giacometti's work itself.

Clearly any sustained form of studio-based inquiry will enhance one's visual vocabulary and repertoire of painting techniques and (hopefully) strengthen one's skills. However, the third painting demonstrates how new areas of inquiry can also be revealed.

What does my experience working on the Imaginary Portrait say about the way our memory works? How does recognition function? When we create something, how do memory and imagination interact?

To answer my second question: the process used was a complex exercise in the examination of another artist's work through the act of copying. In order to accomplish this, various research skills pertaining to art history were essential, including an understanding of the strengths and weaknesses of both primary and secondary sources. Not only monographs and catalogues old and recent, but also period photographs and recordings were accumulated in order to more fully understand the social and cultural contexts of both the artist and his work.

Smith (1985) points out, "there are different kinds of copying, some involving artistic behaviors and some not"(p.147). I would go further and argue that trying to make a true copy of a work is an impossibility. When one takes into account texture and the layering of material, it becomes clear that the best one can hope for is a flattened, lifeless and imperfect clone, more akin to a colour photocopy than an actual replica. The real potential of copying lies in its use as a studio-based methodology, which is to say an artist's methodology.



Within the context of this project, perhaps the use of the term *copying* is a misnomer as it is not so much the product - a particular painting - that is being analysed, but rather the process. Not only are the resulting paintings not meant to be duplicates of Giacometti's work, the knowledge stemming from this research cannot be readily discerned from their examination: the knowledge stems from the process itself.

Therefore, I propose instead the concept of *mimogenesis*⁴: creation through the act of mimesis⁵. *Mimesis* and *copying* essentially share the same meaning, however the former is more open-ended and places a greater emphasis on the mimicry of actions and behaviour over that of visual representation.

This designation also serves to place emphasis on the role of creation within the process described in this article: not only is the creation of artworks involved, but more importantly, creation of knowledge.

In his article about copying in the classroom, Hubbard (1991) states that "by studying why artists have copied artworks and by observing the uses that professional artists have made of their copying activities, students may strengthen their art education rather than weaken it"(p.39). Kozlowski and Yakel (1980) also emphasize the necessity of understanding the artist's process, but go further in their call for art-education to learn from artists.

To assume that the visual imagery the artist makes is totally original is to place him on a pedestal and to deny the source of his ideas and skills. It is hypocritical, therefore, to accept their product while denying the process. (..)If we are teaching children to make art and are using artists as models of aesthetic achievement, then it is only logical that we look to artists for approaches to teaching art. (p 26-27)

It is my assertion that the approach to copying described in this paper - an artist's approach that allows for both creative and analytic thought - can serve as an original method of teaching art to students at both a secondary and post-secondary level. By using this approach as a template for the creation



of a multi-disciplinary holistic learning experience, students will be given the opportunity to acquire not only technical and research skills, but also an understanding of art-historical methodology and self-reflective artistic production. In effect, they will be introduced to a practical and transformative experience that not only illustrates but embodies the act of artistic creation itself.

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Endnotes

1. This thesis is explored in detail by Falco at <http://www.optics.arizona.edu/SSD/art-optics/personal.html>. A comprehensive presentation of its detractors is available at <http://www.diatrope.com/stork/HockneyTheory.html>.
2. Martin Midwood, head of the art department at St Bees School in Cumbria, U.K., whose initial encouragement was essential to this project.
3. An essential source for my research, Lord's *A Giacometti Portrait* (1965) is a detailed narrative of his experience sitting for the artist over the space of eighteen days. In it he observes Giacometti at work, recounts their conversations and describes the evolution of the portrait with each passing day.
4. I would like to thank my brother, composer and musicologist Dr. Fabrice Fitch, of the Royal Northern College of Music in Manchester, U.K. whose many discussions with me on the subject of my research led to the coining of this term.
5. The American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language, Fourth Edition, defines *mimesis* as: "The imitation or representation of aspects of the sensible world, especially human actions, in literature and art."

